

What Is God Like?
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Scripture: Genesis 32:22-31; Exodus 34:1-9

*Hymns: VT 420 – God of the Bible; VT 103 - Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee; VT 281
Joyful is the Dark*

Genesis 32:22-31

²² That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female servants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³ After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. ²⁴ So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. ²⁵ When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. ²⁶ Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak."

But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

²⁷ The man asked him, "What is your name?"

"Jacob," he answered.

²⁸ Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel,^[a] because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome."

²⁹ Jacob said, "Please tell me your name."

But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there.

³⁰ So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared."

³¹ The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip.

Exodus 34:1-9

³⁴ The LORD said to Moses, "Cut two tablets of stone like the former ones, and I will write on the tablets the words that were on the former tablets, which you broke. ² Be ready in the morning and come up in the morning to Mount Sinai and present yourself there to me on the top of the mountain. ³ No one shall come up with you, and do not let anyone be seen throughout all the mountain, and do not let flocks or herds graze in front of that mountain." ⁴ So Moses cut two tablets of stone like the former ones, and he rose early in the morning and went up on Mount Sinai, as the LORD had commanded him, and took in his hand the two tablets of stone. ⁵ The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there and proclaimed the name, "The LORD." ⁶ The LORD passed before him and proclaimed,

"The LORD, the LORD,
a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger,
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,
⁷ keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation,
forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,
yet by no means clearing the guilty,
but visiting the iniquity of the parents
upon the children
and the children's children
to the third and the fourth generation."

⁸ And Moses quickly bowed down to the ground and worshiped. ⁹ He said, "If now I have found favor in your sight, my Lord, I pray, let my Lord go with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people, pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance."

Picture it: in the darkness, in the dead of night, when he is completely alone, someone appears to Jacob, and takes hold of him. In the darkness, in the scuffle, Jacob can't see who it is; is it a person? an angel? God? He's not sure. The struggle continues. When the first rays of dawn appear over the horizon, the mysterious being touches Jacob's hip, wrenching it out of its socket, and asks Jacob to let go. "I will not let you go unless you bless me," is Jacob's reply. Then this being re-names him: "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel [meaning, "wrestles with God"], because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome." When Jacob asks the being's name, they evade him with a question: "Why do you ask my name?" And then Jacob/Israel receives his blessing in the dawn light. And Jacob names the place Peniel, because he "saw God face to face" and lived to tell the tale – albeit with a limp.

This story is just one example of the many enigmatic and mysterious encounters with God that appear throughout our Scriptures. It's not exactly a comforting story, this tale of wrestling in darkness. It doesn't really end up answering any questions about who this being was – it might even leave us with a few more. But this being the story of how the people of Israel got their name should tell us that it's an important glimpse into what it means to be people of faith. It means to wrestle with God – the God of the Bible.

When we speak of the God of the Bible, many of those stories we learned as children in Sunday school might come to mind:

- God the Creator, who then walked in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 1-2)
- Moses and the burning bush, where God says "I am who I am/I will be who I will be" (Exodus 3)
- God who meets Hagar and her son Ishmael in the wilderness, whom she names "The God who sees" (Gen. 16)
- The God who leads the Israelites through the wilderness as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night (Exodus 13)

- The God who is not in the wind, fire, or earthquake, but in the still, small voice that speaks to the prophet Elijah (1 Kings 19).

When we speak of the God of the Bible, then, we might just stumble into the question of “which one?” There seem to be so many versions and descriptions of God, some of which don’t fit together. And yet, the Bible is one of our primary sources for learning about God. So how do we know what God is really like?

In the Bible, God doesn’t just appear in different ways or using different divine names. God also seems to have kind of a slippery personality! As Bible scholar Peter Enns writes, “The Bible says a lot about God that is comforting, encouraging, and inspiring, but at other times not so much. The Bible sends us conflicting messages about what this God is like. *The Lord is my shepherd* or *Even though I walk through the darkest valley* (Ps. 23:1, 4) aren’t always enough to balance out *I am going to ...destroy...all flesh in which is the breath of life* (Gen. 6:17) or *Take the blasphemer outside the camp ... and stone him* (Lev. 24:14). Making sense of this God creates challenges for me,” says Enns, “and ... I have a hard time connecting the God of back there and then with my world here and now.”¹ (Patrick will get to the issue of divine violence in an upcoming sermon, so I’ll put that to one side for now.) But what Enns is getting at, once again, is that this is a really ancient book. There’s no getting around that – and we don’t need to! We need to remember that what we have in the Bible is not some uniform, permanent, once-and-for all depiction of God, but glimpses of who God is, of how ancient people experienced and understood God to be, filtered down to us through the millennia. Enns says, “*The God I read about in the Bible is not what God is like – in some timeless abstraction, and that’s that – but how God was imagined and*

¹ Peter Enns, *How the Bible Actually Works: In Which I Explain How an Ancient, Ambiguous, and Diverse Book Leads Us to Wisdom Rather than Answers - and Why That’s Great News* (New York: Harper One, 2019), 122-123.

then reimagined by ancient people of faith living in real times and places."² Now he doesn't mean "imagined" in the sense of "made up" but rather how they used terms and ideas from their cultural and historical time to try to describe the mysterious God with whom they were in relationship, the God who always overflows our human concepts and attempts to understand.

Notice that Enns says "imagined and reimagined." That's right – even in the Bible, we have people trying out a certain name for God and then reimagining it when something like an exile happened, bringing with it big questions about where God was when such disasters happened to God's people. One example Enns gives of this development of Israelite theology or God-talk over time is found in a very well-known passage of the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20. If we look carefully, this passage reflects a certain stage in the development of monotheism, the belief in one God. The "*first thing out of Yahweh's mouth is: I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; **you shall have no other gods before me.***" (Exodus 20:2-3)." Enns points out that it doesn't say there are no other gods or I am the only real God. It says that Yahweh is the best of all the gods and goddesses that there were at that time, and the only one the Israelites are to worship. This is echoed other places, such as Psalm 95:3: "*Yahweh is a great God, and a great King **above all gods.***" In a time and place that was thoroughly polytheistic, consisting of many gods and goddesses, the early Israelites tried to explain their God, Yahweh, as the best of all the gods³ – an explanation we have since let go of as it became less culturally relevant.

² Enns, 124-125.

³ Enns, 141, 143. Cf. 138-139.

Enns's point here isn't about how silly the early Israelites were for thinking in their own cultural and historical terms, but rather that even in the Bible itself, we see ordinary people of faith making sense of God, describing what God is like, in terms drawn from their own experience. And, crucially, we also see the Israelite understanding of God change over time, as successive generations re-imagined and re-interpreted what God is like in their own terms. The fact that these interpretations and reinterpretations appear in our Bible means, for Enns, that we are also called to reinterpret and rearticulate what God is like for our time and place. The Bible not only gives us permission to do this, but calls us to this important theological work. Enns puts it this way: "*We follow the lead of these [biblical] writers not by simply reproducing how they imagined God for their time, but by reimagining God for ourselves in our time....*" The Bible, in other words, doesn't tell us what to think about God, but teaches us how to think for ourselves about God, how to recognize God in our own lives. Here's Enns again: "*[R]eimagining God for one's here and now is what Christians and Jews have been doing ever since there have been Christians and Jews. ...And that process of reimagination began. ... within the pages of the Bible itself.*" Enns calls this our "*sacred responsibility.*"⁴

So let's turn to an example of this kind of interpretation and reinterpretation. Our second Scripture text for today is from Exodus 34, when the second set of stone tablets bearing the Ten Commandments was given to Moses (who had broken the first set in anger at the idol-worship of the Israelites). In this passage, God describes Godself, saying,

"The LORD, the LORD,
a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger,

⁴ Enns, 144, 125.

and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,
7 keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation,
forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,
yet by no means clearing the guilty,
but visiting the iniquity of the parents
upon the children
and the children's children
to the third and the fourth generation.”

Now we might feel quite comfortable with the first half of this passage, which speaks of God's compassion, graciousness, steadfast or “loyal” love⁵ and faithfulness, forgiveness. But when we get to the part about God's wrath lasting till the third and fourth generations, we might start to squirm in our seats. But as pointed out in The Bible Project video on this passage, notice the very unequal numbers listed here. While God's justice in response to wrongdoing affects four generations, God's love endures for one thousand generations! This is above all a God of love and compassion, as God shows in making a new covenant with the people who have literally just betrayed the first one with their Golden Calf – while the covenant ceremony was still happening!⁶ This ancient understanding of God as overwhelmingly on the side of love has resonated throughout the generations, which is why this description of God is repeated and quoted over 20 times in the Bible.⁷ In wrestling with the tension between God's merciful love and God's justice, this ancient passage has proved an apt description that speaks its blessing to us across the years – and will take on added significance with the coming of Jesus.

This brings us back to Jacob, wrestling with the angel/person/God in the darkness, insisting on a blessing and being transformed in the process. This story – the origin story of the people of Israel – becomes a metaphor for what Enns calls the sacred

⁵ <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/character-of-god-exodus/>

⁶ <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/character-of-god-exodus/>

⁷ <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/character-of-god-exodus/>

task of faith, our wisdom quest to know God and what God is like so we can live well. It is significant that it's THIS story that's held up in this way – not some nice story about how great and obedient and silent and proper the Israelites were, but this one, of wrestling in the dark with the mystery of God, insisting on a blessing, on good news to come from this encounter, even if it leaves us with a limp. Theologian Dorothee Soelle uses this story to speak about wrestling with those too-small conceptions of God – God as hateful and vengeful, as always watching us in judgment, as indifferent to our suffering. Soelle writes, “What should ‘wrestling’ with God really mean, other than to press God so hard that God becomes God and lives out more than God’s dark side?! Stated simply: Jacob loves God! He wants something from God. He does not leave God as God is. He does not let go. He does not let himself be satisfied with reducing God” to anything less than “the certainty that God is named love.”⁸ Fourteenth-century mystic Meister Eckhart put it this way: “Therefore I beg of God [to] rid me of God.” That is, help us, God, to let go of the language and descriptions that are much too small for you, for your vast mystery, for the depth of your love. So Jacob’s wrestling with the mystery of what God is like becomes a wisdom task for all of us: to refuse to let God go. To insist on God’s blessing. To insist on God’s steadfast, loyal love that lasts to the thousandth generation. In other words, it is our invitation to join in that ancient conversation that wrestles with what God is like. AMEN

⁸ Dorothee Soelle, *Theology for Skeptics*: 55, 57.